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Pierrot and Pantomime: from Deburau and Le Théâtre des Funambules to Georges Wague.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the Comédie-Italienne, which had for many years sustained the Commedia dell'Arte tradition in France, had lost much of its popularity and its scenarios had become dated and old-fashioned. The traditional slapstick and improvisation, historically associated with Commedia, had gradually been replaced by scripts, story lines and characters that appealed to a more refined audience taste. The popular traditions of the Commedia dell'Arte were, by the start of the nineteenth century, more evident in the entertainments presented at the Paris fairs, such as the Foire Saint-Germain and the fair on the Place Saint-Laurent. The fair performances variously included popular plays, comic operas, tumblers, ropewalkers, trained animals and puppets. Recurring periods of censorship had meant that most of these performances had developed silent pantomime or song as a mode of communication that might avoid the historical restrictions placed upon them not to employ dialogue. Whilst the Comédie-Italienne eventually joined with the Opéra-Comique to present light, musical theatre, it was the silent pantomime tradition of the fair grounds that was to prove the most lasting influence on French and Western theatre practice.

Following the introduction of new laws by the National Assembly in 1791, business initiatives were no longer so tightly bound by the restrictions of guild practices or government intervention; one result of this change was a rapid expansion in the number of theatres. Censorship was also more lenient and popular tastes were more actively catered for. This offered an attractive opportunity for those providing popular entertainment to expand their business. In 1816, Nicholas Bertrand adapted his booth theatre on the Boulevard du Temple in Paris, which had up until then been used to present animal and acrobatic acts, into the Théâtre des Funambules. Amongst the new acts that Bertrand signed up was a family of Bohemian tumblers and ropewalkers, including a young acrobat, Gaspard Deburau (1796–1846). Annette Lust relates how Deburau at first was kicked about on stage by his father, who was exasperated by his son's clumsiness (Lust 2000: 45). According to Rémy, Deburau's

career was transformed when an old Italian mime from one of the Paris theatres agreed to give him lessons in pantomime (Rémy 1954: 31). The character Deburau used to give expression to his new skills was that of Pierrot. Pierrot is a particularly French variant on the original servant role of Pedrolino, a servant or valet character who is young, personable, and trustworthy (Duchartre 1966: 251). Pierrot occurs in Molière's *Don Juan* (1660) and so had clearly made the transition with the other Commedia characters that had migrated from Italy to Paris in the seventeenth century. Giacomo Oreglia claims that the creator of the Pedrolino mask was Giovanni Pellesini, a member of the Gelosi company, and that 'the most famous interpreter of the part was the Ferrarese actor Giuseppe Geratoni, who made his debut in Paris in 1763' (Oreglia 1968: 65). This implies that the crossover between Pierrot and Pedrolino was a slow transition, a process of gradual cultural evolution. The traditional Pierrot costume is based on that of Pedrolino – it is close fitting and the character is heavily powdered and played without a mask. Deburau's innovation was to place Pierrot at the centre of the drama, displacing the traditional central characters such as Arlechinno, Pantalone and the lovers. He also used a looser, baggier costume, with large buttons, closer to the costume described by Duchartre for Pagliaccio (a character related to, but different from, Pedrolino/Pierrot) (Duchartre 1966: 258). His final change was to use a tight black skullcap instead of the traditional white hat.

Deburau's Pierrot became the star of the show at the Théâtre des Funambules. His success was built on silence; instead of words, he used his extraordinary agility and physical inventiveness to entrance his audience. Duchartre relates how 'he would invent a new dance almost every evening, sometimes eccentric, sometimes burlesque, but always charming' (Duchartre 1966: 260). We know very little about how Deburau's Pierrot was performed. Jacques Lecoq, the French mime and movement teacher, summarised his own conclusions:

> Deburau was big and tall, both physically and facially. We know that his entrance on stage at the Théâtre des Funambules was on his hands and that he exited via the window with a jump called *de fenêtre* ('via the window'). We also know that he achieved a degree of expression that could communicate all of the nuances of the soul, far more effectively than the spoken word. It is said that Deburau hardly moved during his expressive performances. It was in his 'reactions' that the subtlety of his emotions became apparent, especially in his face, as 'action' engaged the whole body.
>
> (Lecoq 2006: 32)

The use of silence, coupled with the romantic storylines, inevitably evoked a degree of sentimentality that clearly appealed to Parisian sensibilities at this time. Allardyce Nicoll suggests that Pierrot appealed because of his lonely reflective qualities, and his hopeless love for Columbine (Nicoll 1963: 93), all of which gave the character a wider resonance that also possessed a spiritual element.

Deburau's legacy survives most vividly in those whom he inspired. The visual image and gestural language he created for the character of Pierrot were strong enough to extend the character into a range of roles and situations, through which

it was able to capture both the popular imagination and the creative interest of other theatre artists. Lecoq states that, 'Jean-Baptiste Gaspard Deburau was not a mime but rather a performer in the tradition of circus clowns and tightrope walkers who had not yet achieved a true mimed language' (Lecoq 2006: 34). The 'scenarios' for his performances included mention of *lazzis* – the traditional term for improvised slapstick routines in the Commedia tradition (see Deburau 1833: 72). Deburau did, however, begin the development of a sophisticated gestural language that was to continue for over a century and a half. Lecoq refers to this gestural language as *pantomime blanche* – a recognition of its association with the white faced, white costumed character of Pierrot.

As was typical for the time, the performance of the Pierrot character was handed down through a succession of father-son and teacher-pupil relationships. It is possible to trace this lineage from Deburau to his son, Jean-Charles (1829–73), and then from Paul Legrand (1816–98) to Louis Rouffe (1849–83). Nonetheless, by the end of the nineteenth century the Pierrot tradition in Paris was in decline, and public interest in *pantomime blanche* had waned considerably. Whilst popular enthusiasm for Pierrot remained strong in the South of France (and in Marseilles in particular) the situation in Paris was more uncertain, and probably as a result the acts became either darker and more violent (for example, *Pierrot sceptique* in 1881) or more refined. The situation in Paris was eventually such that by 1888 a theatrical society, the Cercle Funambulesque, had been founded in order to revive and restore the art of pantomime. The Cercle was partially successful, but its tendency was towards supporting productions that were uncontroversial, thus limiting its impact and drawing the Pierrot show into the salon theatre and towards a more elite audience.

Séverin (1863–1930) was one of the last of the traditional Pierrot performers (Rolfe 1979: 70). A pupil of Louis Rouffe, he had watched Jean-Charles Deburau perform when he was a child. Séverin saw himself as part of a tradition that went back at least as far as Gaspard Deburau, and even back through Commedia dell'Arte to the Roman mimes, but in which each mime was an artist for his age. This line of traditional Pierrots draws to a close with Georges Wague (1874–1958), who reacted against the development of precise codes of gesture and movement. Wague encouraged a more modern concept of pantomime where gesture expressed emotion and where economy of movement was more effective than grand gesture, '*Le minimum de geste correspond au maximum d'expression*' (Rémy 1964: 27). For Wague, the error lay in trying to translate words into gestures rather than using mime to capture feeling and mood.

The success of the Pierrot character and the championing of pantomime by some intellectuals during the nineteenth century is in part indicative of a rejection of the 'classical' style of nineteenth century Parisian theatre. Pierrot seems to have served as both a 'social' hero – 'the ancient slave, the modern proletarian, the pariah, the passive and disinherited being who witnesses, glumly and slyly, the orgies and follies of his masters' (Champfleury in Davidson 2013: 49) – and also as a more refined figure – 'He is essentially a gentleman right to the ends of his long sleeves, of which there is not one flick executed without the manners and ways of the court' (Sand in Davidson 2013: 49–50). This ambiguity, whilst problematic in terms of identifying a specific audience, seems to have enriched the character's historical appeal, enabling

him to speak to both rich and poor, intellectual and illiterate, alike. Pierrot was a parody of the hero figure, someone whose actions always failed, but through this he paradoxically achieved a form of popular nobility and almost mythic status. In this respect the character became emblematic of 'an attitude towards the pains and joys of life' (George and Gossip 1993: 141). This ambiguity is caught in the following description by British poet and art critic Arthur Symons (1865–1945), which goes some way to explaining Pierrot's sentimental appeal to the nineteenth century sensibility:

> He feels himself to be sickening with a fever, or else perilously convalescent; for love is a disease, which he is too weak to resist or endure. He has worn his heart on his sleeve so long, that it has hardened in the cold air. He knows that his face is powdered, and if he sobs, it is without tears; and it is hard to distinguish, under the chalk, if the grimace which twists his mouth awry is more laughter or mockery. He knows that he is condemned to be always in public, that emotion would be supremely out of keeping with his costume, that he must remember to be fantastic if he would not be merely ridiculous. And so he becomes exquisitely false, dreading above all things that 'one touch of nature' which would ruffle his disguise, and leave him defenceless. Simplicity, in him, being the most laughable thing in the world, he becomes learned, perverse, intellectualising his pleasure, brutalising his intellect; his mournful contemplation of things becoming a kind of grotesque joy, which he expresses in the only symbols at his command, tracing his Giotto's O with the elegance of his pirouette.
>
> (Symons in George and Gossip 1993: 141–2)

The decline of Pierrot and the development of Commedia and mime through the work of Jacques Copeau

With the advent of Modernism, much of the sentimental appeal of the Pierrot figure diminished. Early modernists were instead attracted to pantomime and to traditional Commedia because of their potential for the transformation of people, objects and spaces, and the use of various levels of representation. For modernist artists and theatre practitioners, Commedia was interesting as a theatrical form closer to more primitive approaches to performance, to animal and ritual aspects of life. Commedia also exposed and celebrated the mechanisms of theatre making and of acting. At the same time Modernism placed value on natural physical efficiency and the analysis of movement's expressive potential (Evans 2009), both of which gave cultural status to more subtly expressive pantomime acts such as those of Wague.

As Pierrot became a more serious figure, and as pantomime practitioners sought for more cultural respectability, the tensions between codification and fossilisation, between exaggerated and restrained gesture, and between artistry and archness, became more marked (Gates 2011). Pierrot was in danger of becoming little more than a symbolic figure, detached from the thrust of theatrical innovation. The advent of Modernism led to intense debates over the value and nature of the 'natural' in art. In this context, French pantomime struggled to reconcile its historic techniques and forms

with the interest in movement that was, at least in certain respects, more authentic and modern. Lecoq suggests that Pierrot effectively died in 1925, the year of the International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts in Paris, an event that marked the arrival of a truly modern sense of art, design and culture (Lecoq 2006: 35).

But if the character of Pierrot struggled to survive the cultural turmoil of the early twentieth century, the spirit of the Commedia was still strong and vibrant enough to find new champions and a new relevance. John Rudlin relates how, in 1910, Charles Dullin (1885–1949) 'created the role of Pierrot in Saint-Georges de Bouhélier's *Carnaval des Enfants* at the Théâtre des Arts' (Rudlin 1994: 185) – in doing so connecting with the long tradition of French Pierrots. Only three years later, as change started to sweep across Europe, Dullin joined Jacques Copeau's new theatrical enterprise, the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier – a project that Copeau (1879–1949) intended as a break from the traditions of the nineteenth century Parisian theatre. The activity of the new company was curtailed by the outbreak of the First World War in 1914; Dullin enlisted and was sent to the trenches on the frontline, but he remained in correspondence with Copeau and in some of his letters he is clearly enthused about the possibility of starting a new Commedia troupe after the War. In a separate set of letters to his mistress Elise Toulemon, Dullin also records how he has

> discovered a genuine actor and three improvisers, two of whom descend in a direct line from fairground performers. I give them a scenario and they improvise anything I like. They sing, clown, do Japanese, Spanish, and Italian dances, speak gibberish that sounds just like foreign languages! Evoke for them one word in some foreign civilization about which they know nothing and it's enough to trigger the most unforeseen and droll fantasies. The eighteenth-century and fairground theatre survives in these blokes intact!
>
> (Rudlin 1994: 18)

Dullin also wrote to Louis Jouvet (1887–1951), another of the founding members of Copeau's company, outlining 'characters for a new Commedia, part circus-, part *commedia dell'arte*-based' (Rudlin 1994: 188). He wrote passionately about the kind of actors he thought were right for this kind of work:

> I would like them to be as near to the people as possible – simple folk – artisans – this genre is incompatible with aestheticism and rhythmical and other chinoiseries. Our farceurs would have to be dancers, acrobats, jugglers, musicians, but with the natural ability of clowns and fairground acrobats. They would have to be *alive*, good drinkers, tellers of jokes and tall stories, good to be with... In order to effect such an education, we must forget that we are actors, forget there ever were such things as actors or plays. Wipe any concern for the farceurs of the Middle Ages from our minds, forget Molière lock stock and barrel... Start from nothing in order to arrive at everything. One of the essential conditions, I think, would be great camaraderie and, if possible, living a virtually communal life.
>
> (Dullin in Rudlin 1994: 189)

Copeau, who was invalided out from the military in 1915, clearly shared Dullin's enthusiasm for reviving the spirit of the Commedia without the baggage it had inherited over the last century. He made various notes on characters and traits that he observed with a specific view to the creation of new comic characters. Rudlin mentions a Pedrolino/Pierrot derived character that Copeau describes in his letters to one of his other collaborators, Roger Martin du Gard (1881–1958):

> An *adolescent boy* whose name I have not come up with yet and whom I imagine with the traits of Suzanne [Bing – Copeau's leading actress and principal collaborator in the Vieux-Colombier School] because we have spoken of it together and she has given it some thought. This character is often very quiet. I have one scenario in which he does not utter a word.
>
> (Rudlin 1994: 179)

Martin du Gard and Copeau saw Commedia as an important antidote to the tired conventions of the boulevard theatre. Commedia seems to speak to societal and cultural needs after times of war – as if it touches a desire for a sense of common humanity, humour, spontaneity, and simplicity. Although Copeau and Martin du Gard did not in the end work together on this project, Copeau was inspired to continue with longer term plans to produce actors capable of working in this kind of way.

The ideas, experiences and correspondences circulating between Copeau and his colleagues during the early years of the First World War meant that by the time he came to organise the 1917 tour of the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier to America he was already excited about the possibility of exploring the spirit and practice of the Commedia dell'Arte. He saw in the Commedia a model for a theatre that was popular, improvisatory, vibrant, rhythmically and physically expressive, and that worked as an ensemble. As part of the tour he presented a production of Molière's *Les Fourberies de Scapin*, which drew on the old Commedia traditions but re-invigorated them through a return to simple staging, improvisation and physical expression, (Evans 2006: 85–116). For Copeau, Commedia embodied a spirit of joyful play in the physical practice of acting; asked why he liked 'Canary Cottage' (a musical comedy he saw in New York whilst on tour in 1917), he proclaimed that he liked it 'because it was fun not only for the audience, but for the actors too. There was joy in it' (Copeau 1990: 151).

Copeau's determination to rejuvenate the art of theatre led him, in 1920, to establish a school attached to his company. Here the students experimented with games, masks, circus skills and silent improvisation, under the guidance of Copeau's assistant, Suzanne Bing (1885–1967). The school provided Copeau with an environment within which he could further explore the creation of new character types. He encouraged his students to develop the externals of the character first and then extend them through the use of bodily isolations and improvisation (Rudlin 1994: 182). In 1924, Copeau abandoned his work at the Vieux-Colombier to take a group of his actors, students and their family members to Burgundy in order to pursue this work with fewer distractions. The group adopted the name Les Copiaus. Their daily work included the making of masks, the development of gymnastic and

acrobatic skills, the integration of dance, music and song, and the development of skills in mime. Copeau believed that the creation of a new theatre lay in returning to the roots of theatre – the chorus, ensemble creation, and the physicality of the Commedia dell'Arte. He envisaged a company made up of actors who would each create their own new character types, in the style of a new Commedia, which he titled the *comédie nouvelle*. Copeau's nephew and assistant Michel Saint-Denis (1897–1971) created the character of Oscar Knie, a tramp-like half-masked figure, who emerged through a process of improvisation and experiment. Knie was to become the central figure in the Copiaus' devised production, *La Dance de la ville et des champs* (1928), which integrated song, dance, music and masked characters. Amongst the group of pupils who studied at the school before the move to Burgundy was Etienne Decroux (1898–1991). Decroux was fascinated by the early explorations of silent improvisation led by Bing. Although Copeau was interested in Commedia as a popular form that might help re-invigorate the contemporary theatre, he was less interested in pantomime and silent improvisation as a form in itself. It was Decroux, inspired by this early experience, who worked intensively to (re)discover the techniques of mime and to firmly establish it once again as a silent art.

When the Copiaus disbanded in 1929, Saint-Denis and a few other company members felt strongly enough about the progress they had made in creating new characters and developing a physically expressive form of theatre to continue the work on their own. They formed the Compagnie des Quinze in order to continue with the work; however, the pressures of communal living, international touring, and a persistent lack of funds meant that they eventually disbanded again in 1935. From this point on, the strands of silent mime, masked improvisation and devised comic performance spin out in various directions through: Saint-Denis' work as a teacher and director in the United Kingdom (see Evans 2013: 119–22); the work of Jean Dasté (1904–94, Copeau's former pupil and son-in-law) as director of the Comédie de St Etienne and with his company Les Comédiens de Grenoble; Decroux's mime school in Paris; and the pedagogy of Jacques Lecoq (1921–99, who worked with Dasté and met Copeau in 1948).

Conclusion: Copeau's legacy and Les Enfants du Paradis (1945)

Copeau, together with his collaborators and disciples, sought to create a theatre that took its inspiration from the improvised comedy and ensemble playing of the Commedia dell'Arte, and that also aimed beyond historical reconstruction towards a new improvised comedy. Copeau and his disciples took the techniques and skills of the old pantomime traditions out of the salons and theatrical societies and re-invigorated them. From a tradition that, in France at least, had become codified, self-referential and tired, Copeau created a new sense of the theatrical effectiveness and cultural worth of Commedia. Much of what Copeau (re)discovered through his exploration of Commedia – the value of actors living, working, playing and creating together; the power of the silent gesture and of the mask; the importance of the ensemble – has affected theatre practice throughout the twentieth century, up to and including the work of Complicité, Théâtre du Soleil, Footsbarn and Kneehigh.

There is, finally, one fascinating point at which so much of the subject of this chapter comes together. In 1945, during the last period of the Nazi occupation of France, the French film director Marcel Carné made a film, *Les Enfants du Paradis*, which aimed to celebrate the French theatre of the early nineteenth century. The film's plot centres on the love four men for a courtesan. One of the suitors is Gaspard Deburau, played by Jean-Louis Barrault (1910–94). Deburau's father is played by Barrault's teacher and collaborator Etienne Decroux. Of particular interest are the pantomime scenes, in which Barrault performs routines in the style of Deburau. Barrault had spent an intense period with Decroux developing the techniques of corporeal mime; however, for some of these routines he was advised by Georges Wague, who of course represented a form of professional descendent from Deburau himself. In this manner, the film encapsulates both the past and future of the Pierrot, of the art of pantomime, and of the French Commedia dell'Arte variants and developments, and indicates something of the mythic status that Pierrot has in the history of French theatre. Barrault, a seminal figure in French twentieth century theatre, openly admitted his own sense of affinity with Baptiste, the Pierrot character he plays in the film (Lecoq 1987: 69).

For Commedia purists the nineteenth century history of Commedia in France and in particular the rise of Pierrot and the technique of pantomime is a digression from the essential line of Commedia. Yet such a perspective denies the flexibility that Commedia has demonstrated, its ability to open itself to the needs and cultural nuances of particular places and particular times; and it denies the rich and multi-faceted nature of its appeal. Certainly through the strand that leads from Deburau to Copeau and Decroux, and later to Lecoq, we can see connections to some of the most important innovations in actor training of the twentieth century.

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